

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18
Matthew 5: 38-48
February 20, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

For the purposes of this sermon I want to plant an image in your minds. I want you to imagine a long line of railroad cars sitting quietly in a rail yard when a big diesel engine backs up to link with the cars. What happens? There is a loud bump as the engine connects with the lead car; and this reaction is repeated—*bang, bang, bang, bang, bang*—all the way down the line.

In the world of science this is called a chain reaction. In more philosophical and spiritual traditions it is known as the law of cause and effect. And it is precisely this law that Jesus confronts in the part of the Sermon on the Mount which we hear today.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.. But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.

The justice standard Jesus refers to can be found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Surprising as it may seem, at the *time* this standard represented a moderation of what was permitted in response to an offence. An eye for an eye limited the retribution that could be exacted. In effect this law eliminated what we would call punitive damages—those additional penalties that are awarded for pain and suffering which are sometimes tacked on to a judgment. In short, the intent of the law was that no one should profit from being offended against nor be able to exact excessive punishment on the one who committed the offence.

Yet Jesus here addresses a deeper spiritual issue. For while this standard of justice limits the scope of retribution, by its very nature it institutionalizes a dangerous pattern. It legitimizes seeking revenge. If you hurt me I have the right to hurt you back. Indeed, a certain logic develops from this basic assumption: If you hurt me and I do *not* retaliate in some way, you will be emboldened to take more liberties.

Now before you object, there is a difference between retaliating and being a doormat. Jesus' teaching does not endorse passive submission to physical or emotional violence. As we shall see his approach is anything but passive submission.

To continue, then, this permission to be revenged upon those who have committed an offense against us often leads to escalation. So, if you hurt me I will hurt you back; only this time I will hurt you a little more in order to deter you from hurting me again. The trouble with this line of thinking is that the one who receives this additional insult is outraged and now feels justified in seeking revenge. And so the cycle escalates with disastrous and tragic results. How many wars are the result of just this dynamic?

What is so dangerous about this pattern is that it becomes accepted as inevitable. We sadly believe that in the *real* world we must accept that we must meet violence with violence, force with force and to do anything else is to be weak.

In his teaching Jesus confronts this dangerous assumption. There is another way. The teaching to turn the other cheek in reaction to being struck is hardly passive. It is a concrete physical response which requires great courage. It is to return violence with grace.

The turning of the cheek accomplishes two things. First it requires that the one who strikes strike a *second time*. It is one thing to strike out of passion—that is bad

enough. But if I strike you and you offer your other cheek for me to strike, this second one requires intention and is therefore even more cruel than the original offense. In effect you are saying to me, “Stewart, think about this. Do you really want to hurt me enough to hit me twice?” In short in turning your cheek you are giving me the opportunity to come to my senses and realize what I am doing; and hopefully to feel deep remorse, seek forgiveness and get help for my violent behavior.

This simple act of turning the cheek does something revolutionary. It reverses the flow of anger, fear and despair. If I refuse to return evil for evil and instead respond to injury with grace I not only give my antagonist the opportunity to recognize what he or she is doing and turn from the hurtful behavior, I neutralize the toxic effect of the injury within myself. I do not internalize it where it becomes depression and despair; nor do I pass it on to someone else. The chain reaction of cause and effect is stopped.

Ten years ago there was an example of the powerful effect of this returning violence with grace. A Jewish rabbi was the target of the hate of a neo-nazi. For months this rabbi was the object of telephone calls and letters. At no time did he respond with anger. One day tragedy hit the family of his antagonist. He called to ask how he could help. The man was astounded. Why would this Jew help me? Not long after the rabbi received a call. It was the man asking for help. “I am sick of being filled with anger, hate and fear. Would you talk with me?”

In this transforming moment the chain of cause and effect was broken. Not only was it broken, but a new movement of grace began.

Friends, I propose that it is the calling of Christ’s people to learn to stop the chain of cause and effect. To do this several things need to happen:

First, we need to believe that there is another way to respond when we are hurt by others, or when we are tempted to hurt others.. Revenge is not a necessary response. We do not need to respond to violence with violence. We do not need to respond to force with force. Such an approach may control behavior for a while but it will not eliminate it.

We must come to believe that the power of evil can never be permanently contained or controlled; however by the grace of Jesus Christ who died on the cross and rose from the dead for the sins of the world, not only *can* evil be over come, *it has been overcome!* We must believe this otherwise Christ has died and risen for no purpose.

Secondly, we must with unblinking honesty identify all the places in our lives that are ruled by the hopeless belief in the law of cause and effect. We must identify every dimension of life that has given up, accepted abuse and believed the lie that what we experience is all there is.

And having done this we must ask God for the capacity to stop the chain: to confront those who would injure us with love, not to pass the hurt, anger and fear to others or let it take root in our hearts. And let us seek to become mindful of the ways in which our lifestyles may affect others beyond our vision, perpetuating prejudice, poverty and the destruction of our planet.

May we be people who believe that while the ultimate responsibility for all things lies with God, the ability for the chain of hurt, anger, fear and despair to stop lies right here with you and me. May we be people so alive to the love of God in Jesus Christ that we become people who turn the other cheek and return injury with grace. Amen.